



The Origin and Development of Papier-Mâché Art in Safavid Iran with Emphasis on the Role of Qazvin Artists

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Abstract

Papier-mâché art, known in the history of Iranian art as "oil painting" or "lacquer painting," is one of the most delicate applied-decorative arts rooted in paper recycling and the creativity of ornamental artists. The main goal of this research is to investigate the origin, development, and technical-artistic features of this art, focusing on the artistic center of Qazvin during the Safavid period. Qazvin, as a bridge between the traditions of Tabriz and the innovations of Isfahan, played a key role in the independence of this art. The research method is descriptive-analytical, relying on library resources and historical documents, examining production processes (such as layering and pulping methods) and the context of their emergence. The results show that papier-mâché art initially emerged as a substitute for leather bookbindings in book arts. However, due to the socio-political transformations of the late Shah Tahmasb era and the departure of artists from court monopoly, it shifted toward producing independent and functional objects such as pen cases and mirror cases. The Qazvin school, by using "Kaman oil" to stabilize colors and incorporating themes of daily life and naturalism, laid the foundation for the flourishing of this art in subsequent periods (Isfahan and Qajar) and created a lasting link between "transcendent miniature art" and "traditional paper technology."

Keywords: Papier-Mâché, Lacquer Painting, Safavid Period, Qazvin School, Isfahan.

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Introduction

The Safavid dynasty (10th–12th centuries AH) is recognized not only as a period of consolidation of national and religious identity but also as the "Golden Age of Iranian arts," wherein the relationship between politics, religion, and art reached its highest level (Ansari & Nami, 2016). During this era, direct royal patronage and systematic workshops allowed book arts, miniature painting, and luxury crafts to flourish unprecedentedly (Balali Eskoui & Kiani, 2020). Shah Tahmasb continued the artistic traditions of Herat and Tabriz, bringing artistic elites together to create masterpieces such as the *Shahnameh of Tahmasb*. However, political and military pressures, especially Ottoman threats, led to a strategic decision that changed Iran's artistic geography.

The transfer of the capital from Tabriz to Qazvin in 955 AH marked a turning point in Iran's cultural history. This relocation was not merely a political-security necessity but also the beginning of the "Qazvin School," which acted as a bridge between the maturity of earlier traditions and the innovations of the Isfahan School (Ahmadsafari, 2017). In this new center, artists previously bound to the court gradually faced a new social environment. This shift coincided with Shah Tahmasb's spiritual and religious changes in his later years, described in historical sources as the "king's disillusionment with art." The direct consequence was the collapse of the traditional court workshop system and the departure of artists from absolute royal monopoly, leading them to establish private workshops and respond to commissions from the middle class, aristocrats, and merchants (Yousefi et al., 2023).

In such a transformative context, papier-mâché art (known in Iran as lacquer or oil painting) emerged as a novel and efficient medium. Initially serving as a substitute for leather bindings of precious books (Shahbazi & Afshari, 2021), with the changing structure of patrons, papier-mâché moved beyond the book realm and entered the world of functional, independent objects. The mass production of items such as pen cases, mirror frames, and jewelry boxes in Qazvin indicates a shift in artistic taste from an exclusively aristocratic, library-bound art to a functional-decorative art present in the daily life of new social classes (Khajeh Mehrizi, 2016).

Research Methodology

The present research adopts a descriptive-analytical method with a historical approach. Data were collected through the study of library documents, prominent manuscripts (such as the *Fahnameh* of Shah Tahmasb and the *Haft Awrang* of Jami), and examination of surviving applied objects in museums. The technical processes of papier-mâché production are analyzed in two main methods: "paper-based" (laminating) and "pulp-based" (pulping). The evolution of this art from a book-dependent craft (bookbinding) to an independent art (pen case making) is investigated. Furthermore, influential variables such as the transfer of the capital, the change in patron class (from court to merchants), and climatic effects on the choice of raw materials (e.g., Kaman oil) are examined within the framework of the Qazvin artistic school.

Discussion

1. Historical Context of Safavid Art and the Rise of Qazvin

The Safavid period is one of the brightest eras in the history of Iranian art, during which art and culture achieved rare integration and excellence under a unified dynasty (Ansari & Nami, 2016). Royal workshops, established from Shah Ismail I onward, gathered artistic elites from Herat and Tabriz, laying the foundation for the second Tabriz school. Under Shah Tahmasb, who himself trained under masters like Sultan Mohammad, book arts reached their zenith. However, the transfer of the capital to Qazvin in 955 AH, due to Ottoman threats, redirected artistic currents.

In Qazvin, the presence of princes and art patrons like Sultan Ebrahim Mirza led to an unprecedented concentration of artists. The royal library became a center where master calligraphers and painters following Bihzad's style created masterpieces such as the *Haft Awrang* of Jami (Qazi Ahmad Qomi, 1366; Welch, 2006). Yet, Shah Tahmasb's later religious zeal and political preoccupations reduced direct court patronage, leading to the dissolution of traditional workshop order. Artists moved into the city, opening private workshops and serving merchants, aristocrats, and the middle class (Ashrafi, 2009; Khajeh Mehrizi, 2016). This structural transformation removed miniature painting from court monopoly and linked art to everyday life.

2. Origin and Development of Papier-Mâché in Qazvin

Papier-mâché, known in Iran as "lacquer painting" or "oil painting," is one of the most delicate traditional arts, rooted in paper recycling and the creativity of book artists (Shahbazi & Afshari, 2021). Although the technique originated in China's Han dynasty, its development in Iran is inextricably linked to the socio-political changes of the Safavid era, particularly the Qazvin artistic center. The primary context for papier-mâché in Iran lies in bookbinding. Before this technique, book covers were mostly made of leather. However, from the late Timurid period, especially in the court of Soltan Hoseyn Mirza in Herat, the use of compressed paper and oil techniques for book decoration began.

Iranians, familiar from pre-Islamic times with the protective properties of lac (plant and animal gums) for wood against moisture and heat, transferred this knowledge to book arts. The combination of paper layers with successive oil layers not only gave extraordinary strength to the object but also provided a polished, brilliant surface for miniaturists. In Qazvin, two main techniques evolved: the "paper method" (laminating with plant glues like serish) and the "pulp method" (soaking and pounding waste paper with serish and tragacanth to create a homogeneous paste). The pulp was shaped on wooden molds (boxwood or pear wood) and, after drying and smoothing, prepared for painting.

3. Technical and Artistic Features of Early Qazvin Works

The structural nature of early Qazvin papier-mâché works was based on recycling waste paper, which, beyond economic benefits, provided exceptional strength and lightness. Artists used a primer layer called "boom" (a mixture of chalk and serish, ratio 5:1) to prepare the surface for painting. After painting, "Kaman oil" (a blend of ben oil, sandarac, and specific gums) was applied. This oil not only acted as a protective layer but also penetrated the paint layers, enhancing the richness, depth, and brilliance of the miniatures. This technique has preserved the transparency and authenticity of Qazvin colors for centuries. Artistically, early Qazvin papier-mâché works fully reflect the transformations of the Qazvin miniature school. With the decline of direct court patronage, elite artists like Sadeqi Beg Afshar and Aqa Mirak transferred the subtleties of manuscript illustration to functional objects. Decorative motifs included arabesques and khatai designs with mathematical precision, but the main content focused on hunting scenes, romantic gatherings in gardens, and single figures of princes. The influence of the Qazvin school is evident in features such as the reduction in the number of figures, attention to accurate anatomy, and soft, dynamic outlines. Gilding and margin illumination (tash'ir) gave these works a courtly authenticity, reflecting the tastes of new patrons: merchants and nobles.

4. Expansion to Other Safavid Centers and the Legacy of Master Ahmad Aqili

The transfer of the capital from Qazvin to Isfahan in 1006 AH by Shah Abbas I marked a new chapter in the redefinition of Safavid art and architecture. Although Qazvin experienced political decline, it remained a commercial hub. Artists trained in Qazvin, such as Sadeqi Beg Afshar and Reza Abbasi, transferred their experiences in single-figure painting and independent portraiture to Isfahan. The Qazvin school is thus recognized as the "foundational origin" of the Isfahan school's brilliance.

Today, the continuity of this historical chain in Qazvin is embodied by Master Ahmad Aqili, who faithfully follows Safavid methods. He uses two fundamental techniques: laminating and pulping, employing recycled paper and traditional plant glues (serish and shireh). He applies miniature painting with authentic colors and finishes with Kaman oil for gloss and protection. Moreover, his restoration of lacquer bookbindings from the Safavid period uses the same traditional formulas, ensuring scientific and artistic consistency. Master Aqili is the living guardian of the "traditional paper technology" and "lacquer painting" of the Qazvin school, transferring this technical knowledge to future generations.

Conclusion

An analytical study of the development of papier-mâché art in the Safavid era confirms that this art, far from being a simple handicraft, is the product of a structural transformation in Iran's technical, aesthetic, and patronage systems. The transfer of the capital to Qazvin was not merely an administrative-political move but opened a new chapter in Iran's cultural history, freeing miniature art from the absolute monopoly of court libraries and injecting it into the vibrant body of urban society. First, this study highlights papier-mâché as an "intelligent recycling technology." The Qazvin artists, by developing laminating and pulping methods, overcame the physical limitations of expensive raw materials like leather and metal. The use of Kaman oil, a colloidal mixture, provided chemical stability and optical richness to the paint layers, giving Iranian lacquer painting a distinct identity. Second, the research demonstrates a "structural expansion in

production centers" in the late Shah Tahmasb era. The collapse of court workshops led artists to the urban market, transforming papier-mâché from a bookbinding element into an independent medium for functional-decorative objects. This process popularized art among social layers, bringing miniature aesthetics into the daily life of the middle class and merchants. Finally, the continuity of this heritage through masters like Ahmad Aqili in contemporary Qazvin emphasizes the importance of preserving authentic technical knowledge, linking historical research with workshop expertise. The papier-mâché art of Qazvin is the "generative core" of Iran's lacquer arts, combining paper technology and transcendent miniature art into a lasting glory.